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TAGS: [AJ](#) [ENRG](#) [ETRD](#) [IR](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [RS](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: AZERBAIJANI PRESIDENT COMMITS TO NEGOTIATIONS ON
RESUMPTION OF VOA, BBC, RADIO LIBERTY BROADCASTS

REF: A. BAKU 13
[1](#)B. 08 BAKU 1076
[1](#)C. 08 BAKU 1092
[1](#)D. 08 BAKU 1093
[1](#)E. 08 BAKU 1136
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[1](#)G. 08 BAKU 1157
[1](#)H. 08 BAKU 1178

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse, for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: In a January 19 meeting with EUR DAS Bryza, President Aliyev said that he had directed his staff to begin negotiations on the resumption of VoA, BBC and Radio Liberty. He continued that he was surprised by the January 13 letter from President Bush given his good discussion with Deputy Secretary Negroponte on the same day. "The way can be found. We do not want this to become a major issue for the next administration," the President added. He then proceeded to criticize sharply the content of Radio Liberty.

[1](#)2. (C) SUMMARY CONTINUED: On the natural gas issue, the President expressed frustration with Turkey about not being able to conclude a gas transit arrangement. He said that Azerbaijan had been pursuing possible gas sales to Russia only pressure Turkey to allow transit of Azeri gas to the EU, but this was now "impossible" because of what Gazprom has done in Ukraine and Europe. Finally, the President revealed that he had given the instruction to stop the broadcasts of popular Turkish soap operas because these programs were advancing an Islamist agenda in Azerbaijan, including by showing women wearing headscarves. He said he has also "informally requested" local TV stations not to show women with headscarves, and that the rate of headscarf wearing subsequently declined. END SUMMARY.

Commitment to Negotiations on the Radios

[1](#)3. (C) In a January 19 meeting with EUR DAS Matthew Bryza and Charge, President Ilham Aliyev restated the commitment he made to Deputy Secretary Negroponte that there would be near-term negotiations on the return of VoA, BBC, and Radio Liberty to the FM frequencies. He added that immediately after the January 13 telephone call with the Deputy Secretary, he had instructed the head of his political and social department, Ali Hasanov, to begin negotiations.

[1](#)4. (C) DAS Bryza emphasized that the USG hopes to find a constructive way to return these broadcasts in the near-term. He added that one formula for moving forward might be an intergovernmental agreement allowing Azerbaijan to broadcast on U.S. cable channels. The Charge noted that the Broadcast Board of Governors had invited Presidential Advisor Hasanov

for talks between January 23 and February 2. Hasanov had said he was traveling and asked them to meet with the head of the National TV and Radio Council instead. President Aliyev said that he would again talk to Hasanov about beginning these talks soon.

15. (C) The President welcomed the approach outlined by Bryza, which could provide Azerbaijan a pretext to restore RFE/RL broadcasts without restoring state broadcasting from Russia and Iran. President Aliyev complained that Russia and Iran refused to allow Azerbaijan to broadcast to their respective Azeri communities, even as Russian and Iranian stations tried to undermine political stability and promote religious extremism in Azerbaijan through their broadcasts. President Aliyev expressed surprise about the tone of President Bush's January 13 letter, noting that it came on the same day as the constructive discussion with the Deputy Secretary. He added that he had personally penned the response. He concluded, "The way can be found. We do not want this to become a major issue for the next administration."

Sharp Words for Radio Liberty

16. (C) Despite agreeing to pursue a bilateral arrangement to restore RFE/RL broadcasts based on the above formula or reciprocal broadcasts, the President complained about the content and objectivity of Radio Liberty, consistent with his earlier criticism (reftels). He began by admitting that the decision to terminate the radios was based on three reasons:

-- (C) Azerbaijani law does not permit foreign broadcasts (sic).

-- (C) Preventing Iran and Russia from broadcasting on local airwaves.

-- (C) The content of Radio Liberty.

17. (C) The President particularly commented on the editorial tone of Radio Liberty in December and January. He said that the December 15 letter from RFE/RL President Jeffrey Gedmin to the International Herald Tribune was very negative and not consistent with the assurances Gedmin gave the President when he visited Azerbaijan. "After Gedmin's visit, we hoped that there would be changes," the President noted. He also complained about the mid-January article on Radio Liberty's website that said Azerbaijan was becoming the Turkmenistan of the Caucasus. President Aliyev was particularly upset by a recent Radio Liberty broadcast, which he characterized as attacking the GOAJ for building a park in honor of Azerbaijan's flag, rather than spending on other social services. The President objected to such "interference" in the GOAJ's sovereign decisions, as it attempts to forge a sense of nationhood.

18. (C) The President said that Radio Liberty has selected people only from the opposition to work in their bureau here. He said that the local editor Khadija Ismayilova is a long-time opposition activist who considers herself to be an enemy of the government. He concluded by saying that the tone of Radio Liberty is reminiscent of the tone of this station during Soviet times when it was trying to undermine the Soviet Union. "Are we the same for America as the Soviet Union? It seems strange for a strategic partner," he noted. Bryza responded that Gedmin had offered a dialogue on content and encouraged the President to pursue this dialogue. The President said that this would take time and effort. Instead, the President said that they were looking for a simple change in direction at Radio Liberty.

Using Gas Sales to Russia as Leverage

19. (C) Bryza briefed the President on his discussions in Turkey on gas transit issues. The President revealed that Azerbaijan had been exploring gas sales to Russia only to

improve its negotiating position with the Turks on transit. "Gazprom was never an option, but we used the opportunity to ring the bell. Now after what they did to Ukraine and Europe, this is impossible," the President declared.

¶10. (C) The President then expressed his frustration with Turkey over the transit talks. "We have already lost two years on Shah Deniz Phase II. I never could have believed that our closest friend would be blockading us and denying our access to Europe. This has created a lot of complications and I don't know what to do," he remarked. The President worried that Turkey was demanding just enough gas

from Shah Deniz Phase II to leave an insufficient volume left over to allow Southern Corridor projects to proceed with exports of Azerbaijani gas to EU countries. Turkey's underlying goal, according to the President, was to keep Azeri gas captive to Turkey's market, and thereby strengthen Turkey's ability to exact cheaper gas from Azerbaijan.

¶11. (C) The President complained that the current Turkish Government is moving toward political Islam and away from secular democracy. He said that he could not understand Erdogan's harsh attacks on Israel with respect to Gaza in light of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan remaining silent. He noted that Turkey was in essence supporting pro-Iranian forces by siding with Hamas. "This will ruin everything that Turkey has built in its relations with Israel, including excellent economic, military and intelligence cooperation . . . With Turkey having this position, it is difficult for us to continue our joint foreign policy," the President commented.

Removing Headscarves from TV

¶12. (C) Expanding on his concern about the Turkish Government's promotion of Islamism, the President confided in Bryza that the reason for the removal of Turkish soap operas from local TV broadcasts was not because of the failure to broadcast in the Azerbaijani language (the official basis of the decision from the National TV and Radio

Council). Instead, he directed that these programs be taken off the air because they had been showing women wearing headscarves and that this would have a negative influence in Azerbaijan. "When we see Iranians covering their women we laugh, but the people here may take it more seriously when they see the Turks covering their women." He admitted that Azerbaijanis could easily understand these programs without translation.

¶13. (C) He also noted that he had made an "informal request" to the local TV broadcasters to no longer show women wearing headscarves. He told them not to say anything bad about these women, but to no longer invite them to appear on television. He said that this had an immediate effect in Baku and he has seen fewer women wearing headscarves as a result. (Comment: The Embassy has not observed such a change. End Comment.)

¶14. (C) Finally, the President said that his government has discovered religious fundamentalists in Azerbaijan sponsored by Turkey. The group is called the "Ikramlar" (trans: the Respectful) and they have been arrested seeking to infiltrate Azerbaijani military and police academies. He said that he had personally viewed a video of these individuals participating in a religious ritual. "They were like animals." When Erdogan asked Aliyev to release them, Aliyev sent his people (presumably the Ministry of National Security) to show Erdogan a copy of this video. "We expect this from Iran, not Turkey," complained the President.

Comment

¶15. (C) Advocacy from Washington has helped propel the government to accept negotiations over the resumption of radio broadcasts on FM frequencies. It remains to be seen

whether these negotiations start promptly or show any progress in the near term. Aliyev's now common refrain about the content of Radio Liberty suggests that these will be difficult talks. The Embassy will continue to encourage the government to accept Radio Liberty's offer of a dialogue about content. The negotiations about the return of these broadcasts and the dialogue about content must remain strictly separate.

116. (U) EUR DAS Bryza has cleared this message.
DERSE